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ABSTRACT

A paper, "Young Children Face the States: Issues and Options for Early Childhood Programs," by W. Norton Grubb, is summarized in this policy brief. A discussion of the decisions that state policy makers must make and descriptions of the historical conflicts that persist within the early childhood movement and the current national status of early childhood education policy are included. A framework for goal setting is provided. The discussion identifies populations to be served, program structure and content, levels and forms of funding, funding sources and mechanisms, and ways to ensure program quality. Two tables list initiatives in seven states and the cost per child in relation to teacher/pupil ratios and teacher salaries. (LMI)

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CPRE POLICY BRIEFS
REPORTING ON ISSUES AND RESEARCH IN EDUCATION POLICY

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Programs For Young Children: State Policy Options

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The Issue of Providing Programs For Very Young Children Is Fast Gaining High Political Visibility.

While federal support for such programs has declined over the last few years, current initiatives are coming from the states (see Table 1). Yet, state policymaking in the field of early childhood education is still in its infancy. State policymakers now have a rare opportunity to develop, almost from the start, an effective and coherent approach to early childhood education, according to a research report published by the Center for Policy Research in Education (CPRE).

Much confusion surrounds early childhood programs— their operational nature, their costs, their effects, their quality and even their basic objectives— especially since most states have provided little of their own funding for early childhood programs and thus have little knowledge of this area.

Turf battles persist and the major professional communities with an interest in young children often confront each other over basic philosophical objectives and methodologies, as well as over economic issues associated with jobs and administrative control. Unless policymakers develop a coherent approach to these problems, the current interest in young children could easily fade without effective programs to show for all the effort. Or states could legislate programs that are at best, ineffective or at worst, harmful to children.

Young Children Face the States: Issues and Options for Early Childhood Programs by W. Norton Grubb is summarized in this policy brief. The report discusses the many decisions state policymakers must make as they seek to respond to the needs of today's parents and children. It also describes the historical conflicts that persist within the early childhood movement and the current status of early childhood education policy across the country.

The report does not attempt to prescribe a single "best" method of dealing with this issue. Rather, it provides a framework for setting goals. Once policymakers decide on the goals of early childhood programs in their own states, various elements— such as funding mechanisms, administrative structures and program requirements— can be tailored to reach those goals.

Which Children Should Be Served... and In What Types of Programs?

The goals of any early childhood policy are inextricably tied to the question of what populations should be served. Should programs be provided for 4-year-olds, 3-to-4-year-olds or even for infants? Should all children in a specified age group be eligible to attend programs or should enrollment be limited to children who speak little English or to those who are considered "at-risk?"

The importance of this question cannot be overstated. Most states have targeted at-risk children for their programs (see Table 1). But the best programs provide an integrated setting with children of various racial and socio-economic backgrounds, rather than segregating at-risk children from others. Moreover, while child care for low-income children has been a special concern, the amount and quality of child care available to children whose parents can afford to pay for it is also inadequate.

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And then there is the question of hours of operation. Most of the programs recently enacted by states are half-day preschool programs, administered by state departments of education and run by local school districts (see again, Table 1). But since two-thirds of women with children under age 6 work full time, part-time programs are insufficient.

Program content and structure are also important considerations for policymakers. Should programs be organized like most elementary classrooms where the emphasis is on cognitive development in a structured, teacher-directed atmosphere? Or should they follow the model used by many independent child-care centers, one that is less structured and focuses more on the child's emotional and social development?

The conflict over structure and focus reflects basic differences in conceptions of learning, the role of parents and teachers, teacher preparation and educational objectives. The problem for policymakers is to contain and narrow these differences with programs that permit flexibility and variety without allowing quality to vary intolerably. Although regulating content and quality is difficult, some direction is absolutely critical as a way to realize the benefits of exemplary programs.

What Levels of Funding Will the Programs Receive... and In What Forms?

Much of a state's early childhood policy will be shaped by decisions about funding. Given the wide variation in what teachers are paid, in adult-child ratios, in access to free or reduced-cost facilities, in volunteer resources, in the costs of living and in the extra services provided by programs, it is nearly impossible to say what a "typical" early childhood program might cost.

However, available figures can provide some guidance about general magnitudes. Even though data on costs are poor, it is still possible to build representative budgets to consider the tradeoffs among components of early childhood programs. There are several methods of determining annual per-child costs based on different combinations of adult-child ratios, salaries, and ancillary services (see Table 2). For example, a preschool program which pays teachers minimum wage, which has a teacher-pupil ratio of 1:10, and which has moderate costs for space, materials, etc., could cost $1,533 per year. Assuming more reasonable teacher salaries of $18,600 with the same teacher-pupil ratio, and the same fixed costs, the cost-per-child increases to $2,663. While teacher salaries and teacher-pupil ratios are the major options affecting annual costs-per-child, other program components also must be considered when calculating costs.

The issue of appropriate costs can never be fully resolved and analyzing costs cannot eliminate political battles or make difficult tradeoffs any easier. But it can clarify the available choices and the likely consequences of legislative decisions.

Another fiscal decision involves funding sources and mechanisms.

One way to stretch state funds is to require local revenues to support some fraction of the total costs; but if this fraction is too high, few cities and school districts would want to participate. Another option would be to require parents to contribute to programs; especially on a sliding-fee basis. In this case, the design of the fee schedule may be crucial to the participation of families with different incomes.

States could fund early childhood programs in a number of ways. The simplest option would be to expand existing programs— either child-care programs funded through Title XX/SSBG funds or Head Start programs. This would add state revenues to existing federal funds, thereby allowing more low-income children to be served. State funds could also support services for more moderate-income children, allowing them to join existing programs by using a sliding-fee schedule. The simplicity of this alternative is obviously an advantage, since it would not be

TABLE 1

State Initiatives in Early Childhood Education

POPULATION SERVED	HOURS OF OPERATION	NUMBERS SERVED/ RESOURCES	RATIOS	ECE TRAINING	METHOD OF FUNDING
District of Columbia (enacted 1968)					
4-year-olds	51 full-day 69 half-day	3,300 children $2.9 million	1:15 (full-day) 1:10 (half-day)	yes	Local district funding since 1982; previously Chapter 1 funds
Florida (begun 1986)					
Migrant children 3-4	full-day	1,528 children in 100 programs	1:10	no	Some Ch. I funds. Districts may subcontract to private non-profits
Florida (enacted 1986; begun 1986-87)					
Children 3-4; 50% must be disadvantaged	local option	8 pilot projects 650 children; $750,000 (1986-87)	local option	yes	Project grants to school districts
Illinois (enacted 1985; begun Jan. 1986)					
Children 3-5 "at risk"	half or full-day	7,4000 children in 234 districts 12.1 million	none; 1:8 preferred	yes	Project grants, up to one per district; no local match
Louisiana (enacted 1985; begun fall 1985)					
4-year-olds "at risk"	mostly full-day	1,000 children in 37 of 66 districts $2.1 million	1:10 with aide; 1:5 without	no	Project grants, 1-4 grants per district; no local match
Maine (enacted 1979)					
4-year-olds	most half-day; some 2 days/week	656 children $1.6 million	no limit	no	Funded through the regular school aid program
Maryland (enacted 1979)					
4-year olds	half-day	2,225 children in 55 schools $2.25 million	1:10	yes	Project funding; schools selected based on low test scores
Massachusetts (enacted 1985); begun fall 1986)					
Varied—program discretion	half-day or full-day	Unknown	being developed (probably 1:10)	yes*	Competitive grants to districts, mostly low-income
Michigan (pilot projects Jan.-Sept. 1986)					
4-year olds "at risk"	mostly half-day	400-500 children in 23 projects	1:10	no	Project grants to school at districts, providing 30% of funding
New Jersey (since 1903)					
4-year-olds	half-day	6,029 children in 93 districts	1:25	no**	Funding through the regular school aid program

(TABLE 1 CONTINUED)

State Initiatives in Early Childhood Education

POPULATION SERVED	HOURS OF OPERATION	NUMBERS SERVED/ RESOURCES	RATIOS	ECE TRAINING	METHOD OF FUNDING
New York State (enacted 1967)					
4-year olds 90% disadvantaged	mostly half-day	9,300 children in 75 districts $20 million, $2,600/child	1:7.5	no	Project grants with 11% local funding
New York City (enacted 1986; implemented 1986-87)					
Low-income 4-year olds	half-day	2,600 children $6.7 million	1:10	yes	Project grants, with high-need areas targeted
Ohio (1985-86)					
3-5 year-olds	2 with 2 half-days/week; 1 full-day	120 children in 3 pilot projects	1:12	no*	Project grants to districts; personnel costs paid locally
Oklahoma (enacted 1980)					
4-year-olds	half-day or full-day	1,400 children in 34 programs $1 million	1:10	yes	Project grants to school districts
Pennsylvania (since 1965)					
4-year-olds	half-day or full-day	unknown	no regs	unknown	Regular state aid formula for kindergartens used
South Carolina (enacted 1984)					
4-year-olds with deficient "readiness"	half-day	6,500 children $8.7 million, $1,053/child	1:10	yes	Allocation to each district based on students "not ready"
Texas (enacted 1984; begun fall 1985)					
4-year-olds, low income or limited English	half-day	35,000 children in 495 districts, $29.5 million	1:22 (with exemptions)	yes	Matching grant with state match based on local property value
Washington (enacted 1985)					
4-year-olds, Head Start eligibility	mostly half-day	1,000 children $2.9 million, $2,700/child	1:6	yes	Funds to Head Start agencies or schools; priority to districts with most at-risk children

*New early childhood credentials are being developed in Massachusetts and Ohio.

**In Louisiana a nursery or kindergarten certificate is preferred; in New Jersey most teachers have a nursery endorsement.

SOURCES: Gnezda and Robinson 1985; Children's Defense Fund 1985; Schweinhart 1985.

Table 2

Annual Costs Per Child Under Alternative Assumptions

Ratio of Teachers to Pupils	Teacher Salaries			
	Minimum Wage	Current Average Childcare Teacher	Average of Childcare and Elementary Teachers	Average Elementary School Teacher
	$ 7,300	$12,800	$18,600	$24,500
1:20	$ 1,168	$ 1,443	$ 1,733	$ 2,028
1:15	1,290	1,656	2,043	2,436
1:10	1,533	2,083	2,663	3,253
1:6	2,020	2,936	3,903	4,886

This table also assumes the following fixed costs:

Other personnel costs	$373
Space costs	$130
Materials	$130
Miscellaneous costs	$100

These costs may vary, but the effect of their variation on total annual costs per child is much less than that of teacher salaries or teacher-pupil ratios.

necessary to develop new administrative structures or program models.

Additional Options For Funding Mechanisms Include:

- ☐ **Expanding state tax credits:** increasing the credit (or deduction) to individuals or to corporations.
- ☐ **Project grants:** eligibility can include school districts only, school districts with subcontracts allowed, or both school districts and community organizations.
- ☐ **Formula funding:** using existing formulas which fund only school districts, or creating new ones which allow schools, community organizations, cities, towns and counties to receive funds.
- ☐ **Vouchers:** to parents with unrestricted use, or to parents to be used for programs of specified quality.
- ☐ **Multiprogram funding:** such as the system used by California. This complex system allows eligible parents with different needs to choose among a range of programs. Coordinating these programs is difficult and costs are relatively high, but the California model provides a vision of early childhood programs where flexibility and variety are enhanced.

How Can High Quality in the Programs be Ensured?

Once content, structure and funding choices are made, states must still make sure the programs are of good quality. Obviously, many of the choices about quality are made in legislative prescriptions about operating hours, adult-child ratios, teacher salaries, costs-per-child and other program components. For example, the decision to fund a half-day preschool, as many states have done, is also a decision not to expand day care that best meets the needs of working parents; a very low spending per child is implicitly a decision not to require programs of high quality.

Still another means of guiding the quality of early childhood programs is teacher certification. In this area, researchers and practitioners have reached one unanimous conclusion: teachers of young children must have specific training in early childhood development. According to this reasoning, a teacher with a community college certificate in early childhood education with a Child Development Associate credential would be preferable to someone with a B.A.-level elementary teaching certificate but without training in early childhood education.

Programs can also be enhanced by the actions of the state administering agency, through licensing requirements and technical assistance. All states license child-care facilities, although licensing is usually interpreted as ensuring that minimum health and safety standards are met, rather than enhancing the quality of the programs. Technical assist-

ance— providing consultation, workshops, information and access to experts in the field— is a better way to encourage development of good programs.

Hopes For Children

As an area of governmental concern, early childhood policy is still in its infancy. Most programs enacted thus far have been small and some of them seem to have been legislative accidents without much public support. Some of them have realized the worst fears of early childhood advocates while some of them are excellent models upon which to build. There is no dearth of options available to state policymakers. Rather, the problem is to decide on a state's goals and then devise the mechanisms to best accomplish them. ■

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**The views expressed in CPRE publications are those of the individual authors and not necessarily those of the Center, its institutional members or the U.S. Department of Education.*

This issue of **CPRE Policy Briefs** is based on the Research Report, Young Children Face the States: Issues and Options for Early Childhood Programs, by W. Norton Grubb.

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